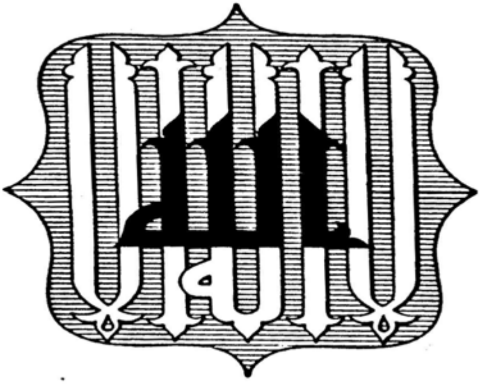
THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN ISLAM

Hasan abdu'l-Hakim(Gai Eaton)



There is no God but Allah

هدية من جمعية تبليغ الإسلام

Conveying Islamic Message Society

Site: www.islamic-message.net

E-Mail: info_en@islamic-message.net

P.O. Box 834 – Alex – Egypt

THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN ISLAM

The first part of the Muslim confession of faith (the ***Shahada***) is the basis for the concept of God in Islam. The Muslim bears witness that: "There is no god but God". or "no divinity but the (one) Divinity". The revealed Scripture of Islam, the Qur'an, is like a vast commentary on this simple statement, drawing from it all its implications for human life and thought.

This conception of the Deity is strictly monotheistic and unitarian. God alone has absolute being, totally independent and totally self-sufficient. Whatever exists or ever could exist does so by His will. He has no "partner" either in creating the universe or in maintaining it in existence. He is not only the "First Cause" hut also ultimately, the only cause, and He is Himself uncaused. The Qur'an tells us: "Say: He is Allah. One, the utterly Self-sufficient: He begets not neither is He begotten, and there is nothing that is like unto Him". It tells us also that: "When He wills a thing to be. He but says unto it - Be!; and it is".

A further implication of the first part of the ***Shahada*** is that there can be no power, force or agency in the heavens or on earth which is independent of God. Everything that exists -and everything that happens-is subject to His control; there is nothing that can compete with Him or that escapes His grasp, nothing that does not bear witness to His creative power and majesty. "The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein praise

Him", says the Qur'an.

"And there is not a tiling that does not hymn His praise, though you understand not their praise".

In the Islamic view, it is impossible for the human mind to form an adequate conception of God as He is in His eternal and absolute being. The creature cannot comprehend the Creator. According to the Qur'an, "No (human) vision encompasseth Him, yet He encompasseth (all) vision".

But Islam does not demand blind belief. The Qur'an tells us a great deal about the nature of the Divine, and it describes God by a number of terms-called "The most beautiful Names" - which help us to understand Him. The Qur'an tells us: "Allah, there is no god but He, the Living, (the eternally Self-subsistent. Slumber overtakes Him not, nor sleep. To Him belong all that is in the heavens and all that is upon earth. Who is there than (can) intercede with Him except by His leave? He knows what is before them and what is behind them, and they comprehend naught of His knowledge save what He pleases. His Throne extends over the heavens and the earth, and He is not wearied by preserving them; and He is the Most High, the Immense".

He is ***Al-Ahad***. "the One", absolute unity. This is in sharp contrast to the Christian conception of the Trinity. The One cannot be divided, nor can it be diminished or "humanised" by incarnation in any created form.

God does not become His own creature, in fact He

does not "become" anything: because He is the God.

The Qur'an describes Him also as ***Al-Ala***. "the Most High", totally transcendent in relation to His own creations and therefore infinitely beyond all that we might attempt to associate with Him.

He is ***Al-Aziz***. "the Almighty", and ***Al-Jabbar***", for there is no one and nothing that could possibly resist His power, which governs and regulates all existence in accordance with a predetermined measure. It follows that there is no earthly power that is not derived from Him, no strength nor any virtue that is not loaned to us by Him: and no one can help us except by His will, nor can anyone harm us unless He permits them to do so (in which case this harm is a trial to be horne with patience).

He is called ***Al-Haqq***, "the Truth" (or "the Reality"), and to deny Him is to be far distant from truth at every level of experience. The Arabic word ***Al-kafirun***, and this word suggests a deliberate act of "covering", in other words, those who deny Him whose name is "the Truth" have "covered" their own understanding with an opaque covering so as not to see what is ultimately self-evident. In so doing they have shut out the light, for another of His names is ***Al-Nur***. "Light". These are they whom the Qur'an describes as the "blind", for "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth". In Islam everything is derived from the divine nature and therefore from the "names" by which God has made Himself known, and it He were not "Light" there could be no light any where, whether

intellectual or physical.

Nothing escapes His knowledge, not even our most secret thoughts, for He is ***Al-Alim***. "the Omniscient" who knows every thing in the heavens and the earth, and ***Al-Khabir***. "the All-Aware" from whom nothing is hidden. He is ***Al-Shahid***, "the Witness" and. as such. He is described also as ***Al-Basir***. "the Seer", and ***al-Sami'***. "the Hearer". "Who is the Owner of hearing and of sight'.'" asks the Qur'an. and it answers: "Allah!" We see only what is before our eyes, with their very limited range, but no limit is set to His vision; we hear only sounds that are either very loud or very close to us, but He hears everything. "And with Him are the keys of the Invisible", says the Qur'an. "None but He knoweth them. and He knoweth what is in the land and the sea. Not a leaf falls but He knoweth it, nor a grain amidst the darkness of the earth . . . ".

He is ***Al-Awwal***. "the First" before whom there is nothing, and ***Al-Akhir***. "the Last", after whom there is nothing; but He is not only at the beginning and at the end of time, for He is also ***Al-Zahir***, "the Outward", present behind all the shifting scenes we perceive in the world around us, and ***Al-Batin***, "the Inward", for it is His power that moves and motivates all that exists.

He is not only ***Al-Khaliq***, "the Creator", who gives each separate thing the light of existence by His command "Be!", but He is also ***Al-Musawwir*** who "shapes" it in accordance with the nature He wishes it to have, for everything in the world has its purpose and is moulded to

serve that purpose.

When creatures have been brought into existence and fashioned in accordance with the divine purpose, they are not abandoned and left to fend for themselves.

Two very particular "names" stand at the very centre of the Islamic concept of God. These are ***Al-Rahman*** and ***Al-Rahim***. Both are derived from the Arabic word for "Mercy", ***Rahma***, which is closely related to the word for "womb" and therefore carries with it implications of creativeness and fecundity. In one of the inspired sayings in which God spoke to mankind through the Prophet Muhammad - peace and blessings of Allah be upon him - (pbuh) we are told that His "Mercy" takes precedence over His "Wrath".

There are different opinions as to the exact distinction between the names ***Al-Rahman*** and ***Al-Rahim*** (which are placed at the beginning of all but one of the chapters of the Qur'an). The former is usually translated as "the Merciful" and the latter as "the Compassionate". It is said that ***Al-Rahman*** describes God as He is in His eternal nature and that everything is brought into existence through the overflowing of this innate "Mercy", while the latter ***Al-Rahim*** refers to the blessings He pours out upon His creatures.

In whatever way we translate these words, the essential concept is not in doubt. God is infinitely merciful, first in giving us life and the means to enjoy life, secondly in caring for us and satisfying our legitimate needs. This

concept is amplified by other divine names contained in the Qur'an. God is described as ***Al-Karim***, "the Generous", and as ***Al-Wadud***, "the Loving-Kind"; He is also ***al-Razzaq***, "the Provider" who nourishes us both spiritually and physically.

Despite this outpouring of mercy, we still go astray, for man - as the Qur'an tells us - was "created weak", and our situation might seem hopeless if God were not ***Al-Tawwab***, "the Relenting", who never tires of turning back to His creatures when they turn to him in repentence. He is ***Al-Ghaffar***, "the Ever-Forgiving", and ***Al-'Afu***, "the Effacer (of sins)". Whatever people may do in the course of their lives they have the opportunity to seek this forgiveness so long as they have breath, but the opportunity is lost when death comes and, after that, they are judged for what they are or for what they have made of themselves. So the Qur'an says: "O My servants who have damaged your own selves, despair not of the Mercy of Allah. Truly Allah pardons all sins. Truly He is the most Forgiving, the most Merciful. So turn unto your Lord repentant and surrender unto Him before the punishment comes upon you; then ye will not be helped".

But "sinning" and "going astray" would have no clear meaning if God had not shown His creatures the right way, the "straight path" as it is called in the Qur'an. One of His names is ***Al-Hadi***, "the Guide". We are assured that He has never left any nation or any group of people without guidance; to each He has sent a "messenger" to deliver them a "message" of hope and guidance and to instruct them as to

how to follow the 'straight way" which leads to Paradise and, ultimately, to ***Al-Ridwan***, the "Good Pleasure" or "Satisfaction" of God Himself. These divine "messages" have been clothed in the language and thought-patterns of the people to whom they were addressed so as to be clear and unambiguous, and the "messengers" who have been the instruments of this guidance have been men like other men, though in every way better than others.

Inspite of their clarity, these "messages" have again and again been rejected by many of those to whom they were addressed, and it is precisely this freedom to reject the truth that distinguishes man from the other creatures who share the earth with us - the animals, the birds and the fishes. They follow by instinct the way set before them, the law of their species, but mankind has the unique freedom either to follow the "straight path" consciously and deliberately or to turn away from it and follow the dictates of self-will. Man alone has been given a mind capable of understanding the truth, a will capable of choosing the path of truth, and a heart inclined by its very nature to love the truth.

"For each of you have We appointed a divine Law and a way of life". says the Qur'an; "Had Allah so willed. He could have made you one people: but, so that He may try you by that which He has bestowed upon you. (He has willed otherwise). So compete in doing good. To Allah you will all return, and He will inform you regarding that wherein you differ". In terms of this and other similar verses, it is entirely possible for Muslims to accept the idea that the pre-Islamic religions were at least partial

statements of the One Truth, adapted to time and place and to the spiritual needs of different peoples.

The Muslim however believes that the message brought by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) completes the vast structure of revelation and provides a final synthesis, after which there is nothing more to be said. Judaism and Christianity are both "monotheistic" religions, but Muslims consider that the Jews falsely appropriated the universal Truth, claiming it as the property of one single people, while the Christians distorted it through the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. In the Islamic view, the "message" transmitted through Muhammad (pbuh) represented, not a completely new religion, but a corrective to the falsifications and distortions which had taken place and, at the same time. an uncompromising re-assertion of the pure doctrine of the One God.

According to the Islamic concept. God demands of us three things. The first is a constant awareness of Him, even in the midst of our worldly activities. This awareness is expressed in two words which constantly recur in the Qur'an. ***Taqwa*** is commonly translated either as "fear of God" or "God-consciousness"; both translations are acceptable, since we cannot be truly "conscious" of Him without experiencing a profound sense of awe which results in a healthy fear of displeasing Him or offending against His laws. The Arabic word ***Thikr***. meaning both "mention" and "remembrance", has a more devotional connotation, and we are assured that God is present with us when we "remember" Him or "mention" His name, although Islam

lays a great emphasis on the divine transcendence, the Qur'an speaks on many occasions of the "closeness" of God to His believing servants: "He is with you wheresoever you may be", and "we are closer to Him (man) than his jugular vein". We read also in the Qur'an that "it is in the remembrance ***Thikr*** of Allah that hearts find rest".

Secondly. He demands of us that we should obey His commandments. which are in no way arbitrary; whether we know it or not, they are for our own good and are, therefore, an aspect of the divine Mercy. Their purpose is to maintain a healthy balance both within the human personality and in society and, at the same time, to provide a stable framework for human living. In Islam God is the only Legislator or Lawgiver. We cannot legislate effectively for ourselves since our laws would inevitably be designed in accordance with our short-term desires. From the commands and prohibitions contained in the Qur'an and from the teachings and example of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is derived the ***Shari'ah***, the Law which governs every aspect of the Muslim's life on earth.

Finally, since we are by nature weak and inclined to sell-indulgence. God demands of us sincere repentance when we have failed to live up to what He requires of us. Muslims recognise that our weakness, however much we may deplore it, has a positive aspect, for if we were strong we would tempted to see ourselves as self-reliant little "gods" quite independent of our Creator. Being weak by nature we soon find that we cannot rely either upon ourselves or upon other people, and this obliges us to turn

to Him whom the Qur'an describes as ***Al-Wakil***, "the Utterly Reliable". "There is no power and no strength except with Allah", according to one of Muhammad's (pbuh) favourite sayings.

The unfolding of human destinies, obedient or disobedient, as the case may be, takes place against a meaningful background. In the Islamic view, God creates nothing without a purpose. "Do you not see", says the Qur'an, "that Allah hath created the heavens and the earth with (and by) the Truth?" The whole universe is filled - like a great picture-book – with "signs" which bear witness to its Creator and which remind us, if we have pure hearts and seeing eyes, of His power. His majesty and His beauty. The Qur'an tells us: "Indeed, in the heavens and the earth are signs for believers, and in your creation and in all the beasts that He has scattered upon the earth are signs for people whose faith is sure; and in the difference of night and day and in the provision that Allah sendeth down from the heavens and there by quickeneth the earth after her death - and in the ordering of the winds - are signs for people of understanding".

This serves to emphasise an essential element in the Islamic conception of God. Our existence and the existence of the whole universe around us are proofs of God, and this is cogently expressed in another passage from the Qur'an: "We shall show them Our signs on the horizon and within themselves until it is clear to them that this is the Truth.

Does not your Lord suffice you, since He is witness over all things? And so -are they still in doubt about the meeting with their Lord? Does He not indeed encompass all things?"

To sum up: the God of Islam is transcendent, the all-powerful and all knowing Creator and Lawgiver, though at the same time infinitely merciful, generous and forgiving. Man, His creature and His servant into whom He has breathed something of His spirit, stands before Him without intermediary or intercessor, meeting Him through prayer during this brief life on earth and meeting Him face-to-face when life is over.

In Islam, God does not embody Himself in any human being or make Himself accessible through idols and images. He is what He is, absolute and eternal, and it is as such that the Muslim worships Him.